

## **I already give my students grades. Isn't that assessment?**

### **Why Not Grades?**

Grades and Assessment are attempts to identify what students learned; so grades are an important component of an assessment program. However, grades alone are not sufficient! Grades that are based on direct evidence of student learning which are clearly linked to major learning goals, and are clearly delineated, consistent standards through test blueprints or rubrics are useful. Effective Grading (Walvoord and Anderson, 1998) offer numerous practical suggestions about how to tie grades to explicit learning goals and standards.

Grades are insufficient because:

- Grades include student behaviors that may or may not be related to course goals (i.e. class attendance, participant, late submission of assignments). These practices can help a student earn a fairly high grade even though they did not achieve the learning goal.
- Grading standards may be vague or inconsistent and do not correspond to major learning goals:
  - Assignments may not correspond to learning goals (i.e. the goal is critical thinking while the test is multiple choice which emphasizes factual recall).
  - Courses often have multiple sections with different faculty who may grade assignments using different standards.
- Grades alone may give insufficient information on student strengths and weaknesses:
  - Grades alone do not always provide meaningful information on exactly what the student have and have not learned. While a grade of B indicates the student has likely learned a good deal about the subject, it is not possible to know what aspects of the subject they have and have not mastered.
- Grades do not reflect all learning experiences:
  - Grades give us information on student performance in individual courses or course assignments, but not how well the students have learned key competencies (critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, etc.), holistically over an entire program.
  - Grades do not give us any information about what students learned from their co-curricular experiences.

*Suskie, L. (2004). Assessing student learning: A common sense guide. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Co., Inc.*

Letter grades are useful for evaluating individual student performance but normally do not provide information that is sufficiently specific for program assessment. Typically, grades sum the evaluations of multiple outcomes. Students with the same grade could vary considerably in their ability on a single outcome. Students with different grades could be equal in their ability on a single outcome. If we want to know about student ability related to an outcome, we need to collect information specific to that outcome. The table below, adapted from Nichols, *The Departmental Guide and Record Book For Student Outcomes*, illustrates this point.

<b>Intended Learning Outcomes</b>	<b>Student A</b>	<b>Student B</b>	<b>Student C</b>	<b>Student D</b>	<b>Student E</b>	<b>Learning Outcomes Average</b>
Outcome I	3	4	1	2	3	2.6
Outcome II	2	5	3	2	5	3.4
Outcome III	4	5	2	3	4	3.6
Outcome IV	4	3	4	5	3	3.8
TOTAL	13	17	10	12	15	
STUDENT GRADE	C	A	D	C	B	